

**Performing Masculinities in Jane Wagner's  
Monologues: *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in  
the Universe***

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**Abstract**

The performance art monologue has become one of the most important innovative and controversial theatrical forms. This is due to its increasing demand for both playwrights, directors, actors and even the audience. The dramatic monologue has many other theatrical terms as monodrama, solo play, one-actor play or solo performance. The monologue, thus, has all the ingredients to any appealing, unified and successful full-length play. The character in a solo play has a major objective but encounters obstacles. Action in a solo-play depends upon four characterization, the audience, unifying elements, and word choice.

The essence of the monologue is that it is a speech given by a single person portraying a character in the story. Although there is only one character on the stage, numberless characters are evoked by the same character. Thus staying only with that one character can give the playwright more freedom to dig deeply inside the secret soul.

The aim of this study is to determine how the masculine characters are constructed and function in Jane Wagner's performance of monologue through her play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1986). I focus on the male characters, Paul and Lud. And the men about which the female characters speak. The study contributes to the discourses concerned with representations of the male body and masculinities, particularly in live performance.

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## أداء دور الرجولة في منولوجات جين واجنر "البحث عن إشارات الحياة الذكية في العالم"

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### ملخص

يعتبر فن أداء المنولوج واحدة من أهم الأشكال المسرحية المبتكرة و المثيرة للجدل وذلك لما يتطلبه من زيادة لكل من الكتاب و المخرجين والممثلين وحتى المتفرجين. إن المنولوج الدرامي لديه أكثر من تعريف و مصطلح مسرحي مثل المنودراما أو الأداء الفردي علي خشبة المسرح. يمتلك فن المنولوج كل مقومات النجاح لتكوين مسرحية متكاملة حيث أن البطل ينفرد وحده بأحداث المسرحية وتعتمد الأحداث علي أربع عناصر هي: البطل، الجمهور، العناصر المترابطة و اختيار الكلمات. إن جوهر المنولوج في التعبير يقوم به شخص واحد ( الممثل) لكي يعبر به عن شخصية البطل في المسرحية، وبالرغم من وجود شخص واحد علي خشبة المسرح فإن كثيرا من الشخصيات يمكن معرفتها من خلال نفس الممثل وذلك يعطي الحرية للكاتب للغوص في أعماق أسرار الروح الخفية للشخصيات الغير مرئية علي المسرح.

إن الغرض من هذا البحث هو تحديد كيفية بناء وتوظيف شخصية الرجل في أداء المنولوج من خلال مسرحية جين واجنر "البحث عن إشارات الحياة الذكية في العالم". لقد ألقى الضوء علي شخصية بول و ليد والشخصيات الذكورية التي تحدثن عنها النساء من خلال هذه الدراسة، تسهم هذه الدراسة في الإهتمام بإبراز جسد الرجل متجسداً علي المسرح من خلال ممثلة وبطلة أنثوية لكي تعكس آراء وثقافة المجتمع تجاه المرأة.

The performance art monologue has become one of the most important innovative and controversial theatrical forms. This is due to its increasing demand for both playwrights, directors, actors and even the audience. The dramatic monologue has many other theatrical terms as monodrama, solo play, one-actor play or solo performance. Louis E. Catron defines monologue as "a speech that one person makes, either to oneself or to other [imagined characters] (41). The monologue, thus, has all the ingredients to any appealing, unified and successful full-length play. The character in a solo play has a major objective but encounters obstacles. Action in a solo-play depends upon four characterization, the audience, unifying elements, and word choice.

The essence of the monologue is that it is a speech given by a single person portraying a character in the story. Although there is only one character on the stage, numberless characters are evoked by the same character. Thus staying only with that one character can give the playwright more freedom to dig deeply inside the secret soul.

The aim of this study is to determine how the masculine characters are constructed and function in Jane Wagner's performance of monologue through her play *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1986). I focus on the male characters, Paul and Lud. And the men about which the female characters speak. The study contributes to the discourses concerned with representations of the male body and masculinities, particularly in live performance. It offers an analysis of performance art monologues presented to the mainstream audiences that focus on diverse masculinities.

Such performance makes the monologue more and more in demand for both directors, playwrights, actors and even the audience. According to directors, it costs less and can be performed anywhere. For actors, it is an opportunity for them to express themselves and brings what insides them. Any actor who can succeed with a solo play has the chance in playing classical characters with soliloquies. Performing solo play forces the actor to develop vocal techniques, characterization and physicalization. As for the audience they may be delighted to watch one actor performing many roles all alone. Furthermore, monologue presents

all their problems, sufferings and views in a short time. The members of the audience, thus, respond to their lives enacted briefly before them (“What’s New on The Rialto” 4).

The audience’s role is more effective in the monologue play than in a full-length play. Being alone on the stage, the actor never speaks to himself. He either addresses the audience or an imaginative character on the stage. Talking to the audience replaces the theatrical character-to-character interplay as the audience becomes involved in the dramatic action. The monologue is dynamic and changeable according to the audience’s reactions.

There is a great difference between monologue and soliloquy, for the two terms are always overlapped. To begin with, both dictionaries and literary current refer to monologue as a dramatic scene or composition in which a single actor speaks whereas soliloquy is referred to as talking aloud to oneself. Therefore, concerning structure, the monologue is longer than soliloquy. It is an organic entity, complete in itself crafted with a beginning, middle and end, but the soliloquy is an extract from a long work. The monologue is performed and perceived in itself while as the soliloquy cannot be fully understood expect with regard to the work from which it extracted. Examples of soliloquies are Hamlet’s “To Be or Not to Be” and Macbeth’s “Tomorrow and Tomorrow”. Jane Wagner’s monologue in her play includes many separate soliloquies, some of them are easy to get away from the text, like Trudy’s ones while others are not, like Paul’s.

Another difference between the two terms concerns the audience. The monologue is addressed to listener people whose presence is overtly acknowledged by the speaker. It is mainly performed for the audience while soliloquy is restricted to talking to oneself of thinking a loud without consciousness of an audience whether one is in fact overheard or not. The actors deliver the soliloquy in a sequence known as “aside”. Thus, in a soliloquy, the actor does not have to imagine the presence of other characters like the monologue. The audience’s role in the monologue is not to watch and listen only, it is a part of the monologue and completes the dramatic scene by judging, deciding and choosing, especially males of an aggressive or disciplinary bent but build a case for the benefits of a communicative if marginalized masculinity.

In 1986, writer and director Jane Wagner (1935- ) and performer Lily Tomlin produced *The Search for Signs of Intelligent*

*Life in the Universe* at the Plymouth Theater in New York City. The play is about the absurdity of Life. The characters, despite their different ages, religious, mental and social positions, seek to know why they exist and the nature of their relationship to others. According to masculinities, the play finds fault with hegemonic races. Jane Wagner employed over thirty different characters all played alone by Lily Tomlin in her monologue play.

In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Wagner employs fifteen characters performed by one famous actress Lily Tomlin. Marilyn French admits in *The Afterword* that:

Tomlin moves from one role to another swiftly, unerringly, and brilliantly characterize each of these figures. We always know who is speaking.... She moves into them. She becomes her characters from the inside as only a great actress can (220).

This inside should parallel the outside appearance as well as Joe Adcock states: "Tomlin assumes a repertoire of diverse types, complete with their characteristic gestures, postures, moods and intonations" (1-2). Thus the main focus is not what is said but how it is said. The performance text is more important than the written text and this justifies the reason for the theatre-goers to watch plays already known beforehand. A big deal of performance is achieved through language because it is the means which signs are understood and interpreted. Wagner's play deals with the community of verbal and non-verbal signs to fulfill the dramatic purpose.

Once inside the Plymouth, audiences for the play sit in a spacious one thousand seat house before a proscenium stage graced with a red velvet curtain. According to John Gentile, the curtain rises to reveal a "few set pieces: two chairs, a stool, and a freestanding series of steps, all of which [are] of a slick contemporary design. The stage itself [is] draped in black" and a black cloth covers the floor (172). Susan Borey adds: "the set looks like the inside of a large black box. Minimally furnished...its starkness spotlights Tomlin's ability to transfer a multidimensional, colorful, emotional, and noisy world from her imagination to the theater" (36).

Designed by Barbara Richer, the light and sound cues help the audience distinguish between the characters as they come and go in the different scenes. The lighting also enhances the various settings in which the characters appear. Light changes can be insides

reflecting the inner feelings of characters as well as the shift in their activities. Tomlin switches from one character to the next with the speed and clarity of light going on and off. For instance, one character takes a shower in a pool of flickering blue lights. While imitative of real life, the sound cues are exaggerated for comic and metaphoric purposes. For instance, when Tomlin pretends to push a shopping cart, the sounds of squeaky wheels are heard. When she stops to deliver a line, the squeaks come to a screeching halt.

The play is divided into two acts. In the first act, Tomlin performs a collage of a monologues and dialogues that are loosely connected by the recurring appearance of a bag lady, Trudy. In the second act, Tomlin enacts drama of three close friends over the course of fifteen years. To represent the various characters, Tomlin retains a “neutral” costume of black dress slacks, a black blouse with a white collar, and flats. According to Carr, the characters are what Tomlin and Wagner refer to as “culture-types” (*Artfourm International* 81).

The performance opens with Trudy, a bag lady and the narrator of the show. She walks dragging her footsteps and with a curve in her back. She “can’t walk too good” because she wears her “panty hose...roll[ed]...down to her ankles (Wagner 20). In her first appearance, she carries imaginary shopping bags whereas, later in the play, she pushes an imaginary cart. With pursed lips and squinty eyes, Trudy speaks directly to the audience all the times.

Trudy claims to send and receive transmissions for extraterrestrials that are in search of intelligent life in the universe. Her task is to show the extraterrestrials “the variety of life on Earth, and she feels uniquely equipped for the job: her umbrella hat picks up signals from everywhere. Trudy is a living TV set, with lots of channels and great reception” (Rafferty 104).

Following Trudy’s first appearance, Tomlin enters as Lily or herself. She is followed by Judith Beasley, a television spokeswoman for sexual gizmos. Chrissy is an interviewer and an exercise enthusiast. Paul is a middle-aged bodybuilder. Kate is a wealthy socialite. Agnus Angst is a punk rock performance artist. Lud and his wife, Marrie are Angus’s grandparents. Brandy is a white prostitute. Tina is a black prostitute. Lyn is a divorcee with two kids. Other characters are constructed within and by means of the monologue and dialogues offered by main characters.

To close the show, Trudy reappears and observes that the

audience has experienced an “electromagnetic field day” (Wagner 201). Then she ends the show by observing that the meaning of life is not as important as the way people behave and that “if life is meaningless-this is the greatest mystery of all!” (203). Lastly, she remarks, “at the moment you are most in awe of all there is about life that you don't understand, you are closer to understanding it all than it at any other time” (206).

*The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* is about the meaninglessness of searching for a finite meaning in life. Instead, the show urges that meaning lies in how we behave toward others and that intelligent behavior is flexible and responsive to those with whom we interact. The show advances this message by means of irony. That is, the characters are not intelligent in these terms. Whether male or female, they search for a finite place and set of practices that confirm their own being in the world.

The characters in the play are predictable in their search, aiming to control their “being” and the behavior of others. They aim for an ideal place of being as the meaning of life. In light of the feminist concerns of the pieces, the rule and aim of individuality is double-edged. In the battle of equal rights for women, one of the main questions is whether a woman should concentrate on asserting her own rights, and thereby aid the movement. Or, should a woman focus on the collective struggle, despite the particularities of her life? Or might a woman fuse the two and thereby avoid the ideological enactment of manifest individuality or essentialism? It is in light of these concerns and questions that I analyze masculinities that arise in *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*.

Paul and the men Chrissy constructs in her monologue are bodies. They engage in the style of bodybuilding in an effort to realize the ideal image of male strength and fitness which they really lack: a healthy relationship with another person. Chrissy sees the men at her gym as narcissistic. They are so centered on “looking themselves” that they have not engaged her (47). In “Bodybuilder Americanus”, Sam Fussell observes that the aim of the bodybuilder is not to build a body so as to engage others as art and as an art object (45). Fussell connects this aim of men with the “traditionally female role: body as object” (45). In Chrissy's monologue she points out that the men at the club choose to look at themselves rather than

at her although her aim of meeting men goes unfulfilled.

In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, the bodybuilder Paul is a symbol of narcissistic reflection of man and his aesthetic although he appears less than fulfilled by it. Paul's aim is a big, muscular body that itself as such. In order to achieve this body, he engages in the physical labor, the sweat, and grit, of bodybuilding. Paul's ideal is formed around the image of strength and work. It is based in the concrete material body, not an abstraction, and therefore it is able to be objectified, "ogled, appraised (Fussell 45). In Paul's terms, it is a body that "turn[s] heads" (48).

However, Paul does not find the experience satisfying. When a woman looks at him, he feels "trapped" (48). The objectifying gaze assimilates his body as its own. The feeling of modification is compounded when Marge asks him to donate his sperm to her friends. As an object, the body is able to be fragmented into pieces, the desired bits used and the rest disposed. Having made his body into art object and placed it on display Paul loses control over the body image and hence the masculine ideal. This lack is reflected in the failure of his marriage, the loss of his son and the children conceived through artificial means. The irony is that Paul continues his disciplinary regimen and, at the end of his monologue, locates his identity in the same fragmented bits desired by Marge and her friends. He "can't stop thinking about" the children of his sperm he will never know (52). Paul's bodybuilding regimen. Cocaine use, womanizing, and sperm obsession are strategies he build a self image he build a self image he desires (e.g., the body as art object) but in light of the same image breaking down. Thus, Paul's narcissistic strategies contribute to his fragmentation.

The character of Lud, and the men in Lyn's life are constructed as various types of dominating bodies in the performance. In general, the men perceive others as a threat to their rightful place and practices within a given context. To minimize or silence the threat, they call on hegemonic discourses of gender and sexuality.

Lud is threatened by "the crazy world" in which he lives (66). To gain power over the unpredictable world of women, he uses insults and aggressive gestures. He attempts to break down his granddaughter's door, and threatens to call "the paddy wagon" (82). He calls her music "junk" (79) and a "poltergeist" (81). He also

picks at his wife with his toothpick of insults, calling her “dense” and “flighty”, “hateful” and “negative” (70, 81). As a result of that Marie (his wife) always sees Lud as a “male chauvinist pig” (70).

In *Looking Good: Male Body Image in America* Lynne Luciano observes that “the male chauvinist is not proud figure that men take him to be, insisting on his legitimate superiority over women, but rather a man who cannot accept responsibility for the failures in his own life and therefore assigns them to women” (47). In Lud’s eyes the failure of his financial ventures, marriage and even the failure of his daughter and granddaughter are not his fault, Marie is the one to be blamed. In other words, Lud assumes that because Marie and Agnus are women, they are naturally crazy and weird, whereas, because he is a man, he has the natural right to demand their compliance in the rule of his domain. As a result of Lud’s acts, he appears unsuccessful in fulfilling his aims. Agnus comes and goes as she pleases, indifferent to Lud’s threats, and Marie is far from subdued by his insults.

At the beginning of the second section of the play the audience are introduced to two national figures of characters Lyn and Edie. They represent patriarchal institutions, such the Boy Scouts, Big Ten Football, the US Senate, and professional sports. Lyn finds such institutions summarized by Kissinger’s statement she reads, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac” (140). That’s to say that men are fulfilled by their control of social and cultural institutions and their ability to exclude minorities, women in this case, from participating in them. In Wagner’s play, she implies that women are complicit with the patriarchal institutions that regulate social life. They use their feminine beauty in order to gain the institutions and discourses of men. In Wagner’s play, she sets her sights on the specific men in Lyn’s life. Peter appears to be a “suppressive, you do-as-I-say macho” male (148). He is aggressive in his demands. According to Lyn, he “needs” for her to attend to his desires (147). Peter’s desires are sexual as evidenced by his telling Lyn that she “used to be so sexy, but now [she’d]...lost [her] sex appeal” (148). Peter blames Lyn’s problems on her “sexual politics”, claiming “the feminist movement” had made “a monster” of her (148, 149). She is no longer “a woman” but “a feminist” (148). By means of sexual discourse, then, Peter discovers lack in Lyn and thereby controls the

relationship.

Lyn's reflections on Bob reveal that he changed over the course of their relationship. He enacts practices associated with a communicative masculinity. In his new age way, he listens to and empathizes with Lyn and gives freely of himself. Thus Bob is a "Prince Charming" in Lyn's eyes (158).

After they marry, Bob displays oversensitive behavior. He is hurt by Lyn's remark about his leaky flotation tank, cries easily, and takes advanced classes in sensitivity training (177). Mary Chapman and Glen Hendler agree that sensitive men use sentiment to control women (2). Because sensitivity is gendered as female in culture, an oversensitive male poses a threat to a woman's understanding of herself and him (4).

However, Bob's sensitivity is short-lived. After marriage, he becomes more like Peter, self absorbed and insensitive. When Marge's raped and she seeks comfort from Lyn and Bob, Bob dismisses the incident by assuring her she looks "so good" (171). In this case, Bob calls on the discourse of beauty to rewrite Marge's ravaged body so that he does not have to deal with it. Bob becomes a dominating male. When he learns that Lyn is pregnant, he sings "Having My Baby" (175). Lyn is upset because the songs imply that he views the baby as his, not theirs. After the birth of the twins Bob claims that Lyn fulfills the roles of mother, wife, maid, and working woman. That's the most difficult situation for the woman either she fulfills her duties or she will lose her job and her husband. In an effort to save her marriage, Lyn quits her job but nonetheless loses her husband too.

In Lyn's relationship with her boss, Sindell, he is an aggressive, dominated man. He appears threatened by her competitive drive, her lack of team work, as he puts it (173). As a result, he sends her to a seminar to learn how a woman should behave in a corporate institution. At the seminar, Lyn learns how to display plants and accessorize with scarves. Sindell's aim is to male Lyn into a "corporate clone" (181), by reshaping her consciousness so that she enacts practices that converse patriarchy (Cockburn 82). In other words, the seminar redirects the energy of aggressive women-a trait valued in men-to domestic concerns of household décor and fashion. Thereby the dominant place and practices of men in the corporation are retained. In his attempt to reform Lyn by sending her to the seminar, Sindell reveals his fear of feminism.

Threatened by it, he attempts to silence it, fully backed by the institution in which he and Lyn labor.

Lyn's assistant Tom, pursues a different tactic than Sindell to gain control over Lyn; namely, sexual intimidation, or as Lyn puts it, "a perverse power ploy" (177). Since Lyn is Tom's boss, he cannot demand her acquiescence as can Sindell. Instead, Tom calls on the male chauvinist view that he has essential, biological needs and hence the right to "come on" to Lyn. By asserting his sexual dominance as natural, Tom implies that a refusal on Lyn's part is unnatural. Tom's tactic then is to instill lack in Lyn and thereby gain the upper hand in their relationship.

In contrast to the disciplined and dominating masculinities, a communicative masculinity is offered as an alternative in *The Search for Signs of the Intelligent Life in the Universe*. As constructed by Brandy and Tina, the hairdresser Bucci represents this type. Brandy relates, he "just wants to talk. Talks to me...like I'm his...sister" (128). Apparently, the three friends are fulfilled by their talk and, thereby, they build a relationship that is flexible and responsive to their individual and group needs and desires. According to Brandy, Bucci is a "sensitive" man (128). His sensitivity is due to the verbal abuse he received from his "macho he-man" father (129). Further, precisely because Bucci displayed his sensitivity in public, Brandy and Tina were able to help him. The three friends figured out a way they could help each other. Unlike all the other men in the show, Bucci is portrayed as loyal and a man who keeps his word. Based on Brandy and Tina's characterization of him, Bucci appears to be a man who is physically attractive and feminine to a degree. He is sweet, pretty and lightweight. Bucci has a healthy sense of his own masculinity. His relationship with Brandy and Tina is fulfilling because his identity is based in supporting rather than controlling, others. Due to his marginalized status, he relies on Brandy and Tina for their advice and support and returns their generosity with his own.

In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent in the Universe*, Lily Tomlin evaluates the intelligence of masculine body types from a feminist perspective and finds them lacking. She enacts masculine behavior associated with disciplined, dominating, and communicative masculinities. By means of her performance, she

articulates that a communicative body is the most fulfilled of the three. Tomlin is the most intelligent body in her performance. She uses a communicative orientation grounded in performance to construct and criticize masculine practices. Her main vehicle is Trudy, the crazy bag lady, who seems to understand more about intelligent life than all the other male and female characters combined. Tomlin constructs “culture types” (Carr 81) who are familiar and accessible to her audience. Once she introduces the culture-types, Tomlin injects mild contradictions or contrasts so as to problematize the type and our understanding of it.

Tomlin takes monologist control of the masculinities in her show. The heterosexual masculinities in Tomlin’s performance are trapped in routine practices that secure their dominant place in society. They do not exhibit the potential to change their sexist ways. The significance of Tomlin’s work within feminist performance art is articulated by Catherine Elwes when she observes,

When a woman speaks within the performance tradition, she is understood to be conveyed her perceptions, her own fantasies, and her own analyses. She combines active authorship and an elusive medium to assert her irrefutable presence (an act of feminism) with a hostile environment (patriarchy) (quoted in Carlson 164).

From her point of view, Tomlin suggests that masculine egotism and domination are the biggest obstacles to feminism. While men may not be fulfilled by such “unintelligent” practices, they continue to enact them in fear of the fragmented self that may arise should they surrender control or look into a mirror that does not reflect their own self image. Just as men reproduce narcissistic and hegemonic practices in real life, so too Tomlin reproduces these unintelligent types in her performance.

Wagner and Tomlin pepper the character, Trudy, throughout the performance. All the time, Trudy offers a descriptive context for each scene, and in the second half of the show, Lyn reads from her journal. The narrators, Trudy and Lyn, also function to prompt critical reflexivity on the audience’s part by commenting on the characters and asking questions the audience might ask. While an answer often is implied, it rarely is stated directly. Thomas Bruke comments on the play:

So, without saying it directly or making much of it at all,  
Jane Wagner sets us up to ponder yet one more simple

truth of life that we are all somehow and on (some level  
connected to each other) as we leave the theatre (1).

In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Wagner and Tomlin do not presume to prescribe meaning to the audience. Rather, they offer a theory regarding and its relationship to how we behave toward each other. By means of showing how the various culture-types behave, they leave the final verdict to us. Wagner and Tomlin's criticism of hegemonic masculinities is due of searching for a marginalized communicative ideal. In other words, a bodybuilder and a hairstylist do battle and the latter surfaces as dominant in this fictive performance text about intelligent life in the universe. Jane Wagner keeps revising her own monologues according to the audience's reactions to the extent that there is a little similarity between the original script which she wrote and the latest final produced show. Nina Shengold states in an interview with Swoosie Kurtz: "There are challenging, questioning, resisting, agreeing, you've either shocked them, or you're stunned them, or they think you're lying.... That way, the monologue becomes a scene" (Shengold xvi). Being alone on the stage, the actor performs his character, evoking multiple characters, males and females of various ages, with open-end plays. These elements influence the audience's expectations and in turn their interpretation of the performance. Those elements seem to predominate the performance text and the theatrical terms since they construct the fictive world and reality of the performance. Therefore the focus of Wagner's performance is on how the masculine character types, or masculinities, are constructed by the theatrical elements so as to reflect social-cultural roles, identities, relationships, situations, and activities.

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